

With spring and summer road trips approaching, here's a suggestion and it won't cost you a penny. If your car isn't equipped with one of those little GPS gizmos, or even if you do have one, take along your laptop and a fantastic, free online service called Google Maps.

In the old days of trips in your dad's 1955 Fairlane Crown Victoria, the kind of information Google now gives you instantly on command in your laptop would have required dozens of maps and geography books. Maybe even a Sherpa guide and pack of bloodhounds.



Of course, it is very helpful to use GPS systems, and if you're willing to shell out from \$200 to \$500 just to be told by an angry voice that you've made the wrong turn. Using Google Maps on your laptop is great for all kinds of information, and because it's being updated by the hour, gets even better each time you venture out on the road. Another factor about getting your information from a laptop is that anyone in the car can be the navigator, allowing the driver to keep eyes on the road at all times.

Google Maps has many options you won't find elsewhere. For instance, there's the "Set Default Location", something you can do in your easy chair before you leave home. Once you set it for home or anywhere else, Google Maps will always use that location as the starting point.

In addition to the usual route maps and instructions, there's the Wikipedia option. If you're driving with a load of restless kids, they can use this option will look up any information about your destination or anywhere along the way. No longer will kids have to count cow legs or makes of cars. They can have much more fun digging for information, while at the same time helping the driver make decisions. Google Maps also offers many other kid-friendly information and games.

There are countless other advantages to Google Maps, including up-to-the-minute information about street and highway conditions ahead. Other features border on the miraculous. For instance, there's a "you are here" mode. You can pick a city or part of city from your map, and Google will bring you in for a bird's eye view with images or actual still photographs of the area.

If you bring a printer with you on the trip, Google Maps allows you to print out anything you want to save for reference or for any other reason. The enormous list of services for drivers provided by Google Maps can guarantee you'll never make a wrong move. And, best of all, Mom will never again have to insist that you stop at the next gas station to ask directions.